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ABSTRACT

The document discusses a study to describe, analyze, and interpret the cultural climate of an elementary school in Texas which has a special fine arts program. Cultural climate is defined as the atmosphere that surrounds an arts program as defined by comments and actions of school administrators, art teachers, classroom teachers, students, parents, and the larger society. The researcher used ethnographic techniques of educational anthropology. Data were collected by repeated observation of two art and two music classes; observation of school programs and events; interviews with teachers, administrators, parents, and students; and informal observation in special area meetings. Two sketches of fine arts classes and a summary of conversations and data collection are provided. Comments concern the difficulty in setting up the artists-in-the-schools program, pay scale, preparation for programs, problems with increased enrollment, support from parents, and a recent bond issue for music and drama facilities. Findings indicate that most teachers and parents perceive the arts as having value for children; most classroom teachers are inadequately prepared to teach the arts; and most teachers feel they don't need to add arts instruction to their presently crowded curriculum. Curricular issues focus on integrating the arts with the social studies, the relationship between thinking about and creating art and music, and coordination between academic and fine arts teachers. (KC)

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THE CULTURAL CLIMATE OF THE ARTS IN SCHOOLS: BEYOND THE COLOR WHEEL AND THE BUST OF BEETHOVEN USING ETHNOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES

By Robin Ruth Alexander
University of Texas, Austin
for AERA, Boston, April 9, 1980

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THE CULTURAL CLIMATE OF THE ARTS IN SCHOOLS: BEYOND THE COLOR WHEEL AND THE BUST OF BEETHOVEN USING ETHNOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES[1]

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The arts do not occur in vacuo; the cultural climate of society encompasses the climate of the arts in schools. In some elementary schools we see a renaissance of art, music, drama, and dance; in others, we see vestiges of formerly robust arts programs; in others, no arts program has ever existed; in still others, a disproportionately strong music program, for instance, will dominate the arts, sometimes to the exclusion of all other arts. Each of these types of programs exists in and is part of a climate for the arts--in some cases temperate; in others, chilly; and in another, sunny on one side of the street and snowing on the other side. I define cultural climate as the atmosphere that surrounds an arts program as defined by the comments and actions of school administrators, arts teachers, classroom teachers, students, parents and the larger society. The climate can be positive, neutral, or negative.

A positive climate for the arts in schools makes a difference for how arts programs progress; a negative climate also must be understood so that it can be counteracted; and we need some understanding of a seemingly neutral climate for the arts, as well. The area of cultural climate for the arts needs description, analysis and interpretation so we can best advocate arts programs in elementary schools.

BACKGROUND

The cultural climate for the arts has been approached obliquely by several kinds of writers in arts education. The arts advocacy literature of

the 1970's (Day, 1979; Hinchey and Russey, 1979; Thompson, 1979; Goldfarb, 1979; NAEA, 1976) touches on how climate evolves and can be shaped. These articles suggest tactics for advocating arts programs at various levels. As an interviewer for Coming to Our Senses (1977), I provided case studies of four cultural climates for the arts in four California school districts. The total project--Coming To Our Senses--provides one source of information about the cultural climate for the arts. Alexander (1977, 1980) touches on cultural climate in art history classes in three high schools. But we also need more information on the micro level about cultural climate for the arts in individual schools where changes can be made in programs to fit the climate, or, perhaps to modify the climate. Perhaps the climate for the arts is so ubiquitous that it seems unnecessary to understand it. But in an effort to understand the cultural climate for the arts I engaged in research in one elementary school in Texas, the first school in a three year study of climate.

Teachers, aides, administrators, and other school personnel influence the cultural climate for the arts. Children bring with them ideas about the arts from home and from peer interaction. The arts specialists and classroom teachers present a formal curriculum in the arts which sends messages to the children and other teachers in the school. The larger culture of Texas--an intersection of the Baptist South and the Great Midwest with a dash of the frontier--imposes mixed messages through school law, district rules and salaries, and parental wishes and pressure. The purpose of this study is to describe, analyze, and interpret the cultural climate of the arts program in one suburban Texas elementary school and to explore how the above forces influence that climate.

METHODOLOGY--THE ETHNOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUE

To study the climate for the arts in a Texas elementary school, I used ethnographic techniques from anthropology and specifically from anthropology in the schools. Pelto and Pelto (1978), Spradley (1979), McCall and Simmons (1969), and Filstead (1969) provide descriptions of ethnographic and participant observation techniques which are closely interrelated. Walcott (1973), Spradley and McCurdey (1972), Smith and Geoffrey (1968), Hill-Burnett (1976), Peshkin (1978), and Spindler (1955, 1963, and 1974) provide us with methodology for approaching the culture of the schools and the subculture of the arts and art teaching in schools. Hill-Burnett reminds us of how the school calendar is governed by rituals and ceremonies which aid, impede, and interweave with the academic curricula, particularly, as they intersect with the arts for good or for ill. Spradley and McCurdy develop microethnography of cultural scenes to pinpoint the different aspects of the cultural transmission process for children. Peshkin examines the small, rural school district climate and the move toward school district unification. The methods of ethnography/participant observation research used in this study include observation, interviewing of informants and respondents, and unobtrusive techniques.

To explore the arts climate, the researcher spent two days a week for a morning or an afternoon and some evenings from October through February in a suburban elementary school in a small district bordering a major metropolitan area in Texas. On those occasions data was collected in the following ways: 1) observation in two art classes and two music classes over time, 2) observation of school programs and events, 3) structured and unstructured interviewing with arts teachers in art and music, classroom teachers, administrators, parents, and students, 4) unobtrusive measures such as document analysis, and

5) informal observation during lunch in the special area meetings (art, music, P.E. and library) with the staff in connection with events and areas of concern in the school.

What follows are two sketches of fine arts classes and thoughts on the district's art and music program garnered from observation, interviews, and document analysis. This will be followed by a discussion of the cultural climate in the elementary school and its interpretation.

THE CLIMATE OF THE CLASSES

"Making Puppets--EXAGGERATE!"[2]

The class enters, chattering madly--4th graders. Order is restored by a few whispered questions about classroom rules. Ms. Newsome says, "I need to show you a few things. I need your attention. What did we do last time we were in class?"

Dede responds, "We drew our puppet from the front and from the side. We're making paper plate puppets."

"Good, Dede," responds the teacher as she proceeds to stage whisper, "EXAGGERATED. Can you explain exaggerated?"

The teacher's question elicits several responses from the children. "If you were to draw a guy to look funny, you'd make a little body and a big, big head," Ms. Newsome continues as she goes on to explain and expand on the concept of exaggeration.

The directions follow about what to use to construct the puppets, although directions may be more accurately replaced by the word "suggestions." There are: a scrap yarn box for hair and eyebrows, a stvrofoam chip box for great teeth, scales, and eyes, a scrap fabric box for coverings and clothes, a box of socks (don't use the socks--they're for something else), a cotton box--good for gray hair, eyebrows, beards, smoke, and an egg carton box which

makes great eyes. One boy whispers to another across the room as his eyes light up and his face sparkles, "Boobs."

The teacher reminds the class, "You can't take an armful cause there are lots of classes working on puppets." The scrap fabric, egg cartons, felt, burned out light bulbs, socks, needles, thread, sequins, buttons, beads, rick-rack, cotton balls, empty toilet paper rolls, old junk jewelry, fake fur, old sheets, styrofoam meat trays, styrofoam balls, heavy paper plates, etc. were solicited from parents for two weeks in advance of puppetry. A letter was sent home to each parent in the classes and a call went out in the newspaper published every six weeks at report card time and called "The State of the Eagle." (Eagles were the school symbol, kids wore "eagle cards" on chains around their necks for "eagle assemblies"--getting your eagle card taken away was a stiff punishment.) Parent response was overwhelming and Ms. Newsome had piles of egg cartons, fabrics, light bulbs, etc. outside her door each morning, more than she could use. "I wish it would stop," she confided. "We have plenty now."

But back to puppets. One boy, Don, wearing a yellow tassel draped around his head asks Charlie to "Smell, smell this" as Don holds a smell-permeated marker up to Charlie's nose. Kids were always smelling the markers and getting raspberry red marks on their noses in the process. One girl, Lisa, explained she was making "MacTavish the dog who lives up the street from me. I'm giving him braces on his teeth. Does your dog have braces?" she asked another girl. Braces on teeth are a status symbol in a neighborhood where almost everyone gets braces. About four of the kids have braces in this class compared to most fifth grade classes where about one third wear them.

After kids worked fifteen minutes on their puppets, the command "FREEZE" electrified the air. "Cleanup already?" groaned several. Instructions for

putting puppets into paper bags, returning markers to boxes, glue to tray, etc. were dispensed and a rush of students to make "a good time" in the cleanup contest begins. "Four minutes and 10 seconds with 30 seconds off for doing it quietly equals 3 minutes 40 seconds. Jean, you can put the score up on the board. Not bad, but you're never going to beat Mr. Justin's class with that score. Line up for lunch--Table 1, Table 3, Table 4, Table 2." Ms. Newsome calls the tables in the order in which they finished cleanup and were still. Table 2 is almost always last because of Charlie who invariably makes some sort of a problem despite the efforts of the girls at the table to keep him on the straight and narrow.

Now to music class.

"Now let's listen to Bela Bartok"[3]

A spacious room--soundproofed--with a large plate glass window facing out into the hall and ferns hanging from the ceiling, chairs stacked against the wall, a pile of carpet samples called "carpet squares" by the door, a desk suspended from brackets, a piano, musical instruments on a long shelf including a complete set of Orff instruments (tone bar instruments), a stereo, and a book case with Exploring Music IV* and V* sets, Magic of Music III*, Discovering Music Together IV and V, and Making Music Your Own III*, IV, and V with adequate copies for all constitute Mr. Todd's music classroom. The books starred with asterisks (*) are accompanied by the records. The two music classes back onto the stage and are separated by a large storage closet.

In files a quiet class of 4th graders. Out of every two weeks they have five 40 minute periods of music and five of art. They have P.E. every day. The 80 extra minutes is added on to the mandated school day. The two times the class is out of their regular classroom allows their teacher two 40 minute preparation periods. Art and music teachers also have two preparation

periods.

Rules govern behavior in the music class. Enter and exit quietly. Sit slightly forward in your chair with your feet on the floor for singing. Sit yoga style on carpet squares for sight reading. Don't bother others. This classroom is for music--no nonsense. Mr. Todd says, "I'm looking for someone to compliment," as he surveys the class and ignores the talkers and wigglers; Mr. Todd uses positive reinforcement here rather than a punitive approach. "I see Janie sitting up straight and ready to go. I want to thank Travis for being ready to sing. Now let's work on a song, 'La Jesucita' out of the book. Really pronounce 'Jesucita.' They've got to know it's a foreign language word."

After five minutes of working on the song, we move from "3 BOOK PEOPLE" who pass out books and collect them to "5 Board Volunteers" the next item on the agenda BLOCKPRINTED on the board. "You can't be afraid to make a mistake. You will figure out notes and rests to rhythms I tap out." More than half the class volunteers. "Let me find someone else to compliment," says Mr. Todd, "someone who's looking at the board and paying attention." As the taps become more complicated, fewer students want to try. Five students out of 22 want to do the "real hard one."

Last we move to WHOLE CLASS-LISTEN item on the agenda. Mr. Todd asks for someone to name the piece and composer they had been listening to the last time in class. Bela Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra was the correct answer provided by one youngster. After talk about the word concerto, and comments about the instruments almost fighting one another, students are requested to "get to a position where you won't bother anyone else." The kids mostly choose to lie down with their upper backs and heads on the "carpet squares." Mr. Todd asks the kids to listen for a place in the music that

sounds like Dixieland or circus music and to listen for parts of the music that return from other movements.

After everyone is calm and quiet, a girl responds to, "Okay, Lisa," by turning out the lights in the room. Light still enters from the plate glass window to the hall. Eleven children lie spread eagle, 3 lie on their stomachs and the rest in assorted prone postures. One little girl has bells on her tennis shoe laces; she wiggles her feet a lot and moves her shoulder. The rest lie very quietly and listen to the music. After the third movement ends, the children answer questions regarding the piece and make comparisons to movements they heard on previous days. After five minutes of discussion, the class is instructed to "Go ahead and take up the carpet squares. When I call your shoe color, you can line up for lunch. Green and yellow. Brown and tan. Different shades of blue." One boy remains. His shoes are maroon and mud color. Mr. Todd tries to identify the color and they all laugh.

Conversations with Arts Teachers, Principals, and Gleanings from Documents,

1) Artist-in-the school programs takes lots of work to set up, get school district funding for, and publicize.

2) The pay scale is $2,000 less than the neighboring metropolitan area, but "we get most of the instruments and supplies we need. We're going to be looking for a synthesizer at the state music convention."

3) Three of the 4 arts teachers work outside of school to make ends meet or plan to in the next few years--one in an ice cream parlor, one making woven structures and prints, and the third will have to start giving piano lessons after school to earn the money to purchase a house. Despite the lower salaries, none of the four want to work for the larger neighboring system because the support for them would be lower in the classroom. The art teachers still put on bake sales and sell clay pieces to earn money for

extra supplies.

4) An Indian artist demonstrated pine needle basket weaving and a ceramic sculptor worked in the school for several weeks. The ceramist worked with kids several hours a day and on her own work for 6 hours a day in a "studio" set up in one of the art classrooms.

5) There were some hopes of having a full time music and a full time art program for the gifted program next year instead of six periods a day total from two teachers. But those hopes were dashed on the shoals of gifted in math, science, and the basics. Maybe next year.

6) Parents in the district sometimes think they know a lot about curriculum in the arts but rarely communicate with one teacher.

7) Music teachers at the elementary level are not given additional compensation for evening concerts, nor for the extra time to rehearse choirs.

8) The Christmas, 5th grade music program is well attended by parents of children from all three grades in the school--3, 4, and 5--and by children in the school. A few favorite Christmas carols were included on the program, but much of the music is unfamiliar to the parents. Some unfavorable comments regarding music choice reached the principal's office. She defended the choices. Preparing for programs takes a lot of energy, perhaps too much. Is the energy outlay balanced by return of investment in the sense of parents being aware of and involved with the music program with their children? Additionally, with the student enrollment increasing (see #9), decisions will have to be made regarding the size of school programs. Some limit on the number of students participating seems a logical next step so that quality can be maintained.

9) The school district is expecting several hundred new students in the coming year and expects to go from an enrollment of 2,481 to 4,407,

increasing the size of the district by about one half in less than four years if demographic predictions prove accurate. The school bonds just passed included money for a 1200 seat auditorium at the high school with facilities for music and drama. As the literature for the bond issue remarked;:

> At the present time any program put on at ----- High School by the drama department, choir, band, orchestra, or visiting group must take place in the gymnasium. No gymnasium has ever been built with proper accoustics, lighting, or seating for any type of fine arts presentation. With the present demands for the gym (3 basketball teams and classes have it in use from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.) scheduling a time for a production is very difficult anyway."

The planned auditorium converts into four classrooms plus a permanent stage, backstage, and storage space.

10) The bond issue was opposed by a group calling themselves ----- Committee for Excellence. They asked that the voters in the district not pass the bond issue and instead raise teachers' salaries and concentrate efforts on academics. Opposition to the bond issue focused on the fact that only 60% of the $11 million bond would go for classrooms.

11) Support is generally perceived from parents. Mr. P., principal of the first elementary school in the district and for a long time the only administrator, noted that "first we got a music teacher and several years later an art teacher." He went on to explain that it was something that the "upper-middle class parents" in the district wanted when they became an independent tax district divorced from the county or common school district. This separation allowed a higher tax and a higher level of services which parents in the district expected. Then as more children came to the district, more music and art teachers were added along with more classrooms at the then existing school and at the new schools that were built subsequently. Parents wanted

arts teachers, school board wanted it and a staff of teachers wanted it. "If it were stopped (eliminated), there would be an uprising of parental support. I think it's supported both in spirit and financially."

12) The arts receive concerted support from one school board member who is up for re-election. She follows the arts programs in the schools of the district and acts as their spokeswoman.

CLASSROOM TEACHER COMMENTS AND ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The Arts in the School Program

In response to the question "Do you have any problems with letting children go or getting children to go to the art classes?" two teachers responded as follows. Teacher 1: "I have a hard time letting them go to special things--like this special art thing right now (the artist-in-the-school program). There again, I think it's great, but I can't imagine a kid missing reading for it." Teacher 2: "There are no problems. They want to go to music and art...To me it's just part of a total education." (The following is a paraphrase.) They gain appreciation for leisure activities later in life. Crafts can be carried on when they get older. They get a chance to develop their voices and learn musical instruments. "The arts, they're part of all of our lives."

These two reactions are typical of the range of response received from the classroom teachers in the school. This was really two questions. Do the kids have problems going to the arts classes and do you as teacher have problems letting them go? The majority of the teachers responded that they do not teach music and art in their classrooms because the children go to special fine arts classes. The problem of "not enough time to teach music and art" if no special art and music teachers were available tells us

something about the priorities of many of the teachers. Reading, reading, and reading loom large on their horizons and possibly obscure other educational possibilities. The second teacher sees the arts as a part of general education for children. Most of the classroom teachers interviewed at this school perceived the arts as having some value for the children. One reminded me that the school day has been extended in this district to give youngsters P E daily and art and music on alternate days. Most teachers do not think of art or music class; they consider the time their conference period. Teachers in the interviews ennumerated all the subjects they have to teach during a three hour period: reading, languague arts including spelling, handwriting, creative writing, an alternative schedule of science and social studies (3 weeks of social studies and three weeks of science), and then 45 minutes of math. Teachers feel harried, heavily obligated, and overworked in the paperwork department. And testing is coming up soon.

Who Should Teach the Arts?

One classroom teacher commented: "They'd be hurtin' to have me teachin' art and music." Another responded: "If I had to teach the arts, we wouldn't have as much, and I can't speak to the quality." These responses from classroom teachers grow out of inadequate preparation to teach the arts. Most had 1 music and 1 art course. Many took those classes at a local teacher training college, now a state university, which is known for its weakness in those areas. One of the five teachers had an art concentration; another worked extensively with a trained art teacher and learned her methods of teaching. Formally educated art and music teachers have received four years of courses in the special area that they teach. In this school, one of the teachers has an MFA in art and one of the teachers had completed his coursework toward a Ph.D.

in music. The classroom teachers by contrast, except the one who had some art training, expressed their feelings of incompetence regarding the arts, and most likely with some justification. Most have never worked in school districts where they had to teach the arts and don't feel they need to add it to their present jam-packed curriculum. While one teacher said he has students make pictures to accompany creative writing and decorations at Christmas time, the others said there was almost no art in their classrooms. On the night of Open-house, I found that about one third of the classrooms had some kind of art work in them in addition to the displays of paintings from the art classes that hung all over the halls. But I also found a significant number of classes whose children obviously spent time doing dittoed notebook covers that could easily have been original work. And coloring in maps on dittoes where each one was colored the same. Low levels of competence in the arts on the part of most classroom teachers justifies their lack of teaching in the arts, but also explains their general lack of understanding of the value of the arts in general education.

Content in the Arts Program, Particularly Art

One classroom teacher voiced an opinion that there is not enough content in the art program, although she had no comment on the music program. "I guess I feel a lack of substance," she said. "Children need to produce from knowledge. They need to know and know that they know. There've been better days and I long for those." Perhaps one explanation is that this teacher emphasized integrating art with social studies, but had heavy doses of "the art basics" such as color, techniques, and art history in her program. At first, I thought this information was an anomaly, but on reflection, I see this as a valid criticism of the art program.

The argument proceeds as follows: If the arts are perceived as strong,

they receive more support and increase in strength. But it is in this area of perception, as I said in the beginning of this paper, where we get into difficulty. There are numerous different perceptions of the arts among classroom teachers. Classroom teachers do not resent sending children to art and music specialists if they perceive the time to be spent wisely with children learning to value the arts and have areas of competence in the arts.

The point is that subject matter well taught lends an air of authority to the arts. It may be that some of what teachers perceive as art subject matter (i.e., the color wheel or learning the notes in music) may not be the great substance of arts education, but these are tangibles and undergirdings for other learning in the arts. It is not enough that the child knows to add red to yellow to make orange when painting in art class; the child must be able to apply that information in the making of Christmas candles back in the regular classroom.

Furthermore, on numerous occasions during painting sessions in art class, I heard children asking "How do you make brown?" or "How do you make pink?" At fourth grade level it may be that every child needs to do some structured, guided color mixing exercises and write down how to lighten a color, how to darken a color, and how to mix a rainbow. It may be that this was done, but I never saw it and I do not believe it "took" for many youngsters. Fortunately, children help one another. Maybe some formulas need to be written on the board for three days and then erased. But in any case, knowing about colors in art is not a trivial concern. And a color wheel posted on a wall does not answer children's questions by itself.

A further consideration is this teacher's criticism of content in art not relating to social studies. Interpreting this positively, the art and music teachers could use this as an opportunity when it fits to help teach

about the arts and music of foreign countries. Japan, China, and Mexico, for instance, lend themselves to this kind of curriculum development; Australia, for instance, does not have a rich visual or musical heritage. Displays in the library and slide tape shows would help here. Extra released time would be necessary to produce these or something could be done by purchasing commercially made slide tapes. But in my estimation it is unrealistic for the art and music teachers to coordinate every project with each of the different teachers doing 20 odd different social studies lessons.

This also raises the issue of art as a discipline with its own body of content. "Art as the handmaiden" of social studies grew out of the 1930's concept of integrating all the subjects; integration was never meant to trivialize art into salt-ceramic maps of the Hawaiian Islands. Children still need to learn to express themselves in visual modes and musical modes unrelated to social studies. The Christmas season in art deteriorated into a fiasco as each of the art teachers was asked to teach (and research) about 14 different sets of Christmas customs to produce 14 different kinds of ornaments. The children do not really learn that much about the countries and the stress is far too much for the two art teachers involved. The music teachers also were completely frazzled with the production of the Christmas program.

Another curricular issue that should be raised is the relationship between making art or music and thinking about them. Many children, classroom teachers, parents, and administrators seem to equate art with making or doing something. But art is more than doing--it is also learning to look at art, learning to talk about it, learning about its history. And parallels exist in music.

It appears that the art and music professionals--from the arts teachers in this school to university personnel--need to formulate an educational

campaign to educate the public about the arts. The art teachers responded:

> (we) have tried to maintain a line of communication with classroom teachers throughout the year. This communication begins to lend itself to the fact that the art teacher should be a resource to the classroom teachers. Likewise, the classroom teachers must give "time" to sharing their total curriculum with the art teacher. It is a two way street. I know myself that I have much to gain through this communication, but it must be returned in order to be effective.

One music teacher echoed the art teachers with the following:

> I cannot count times and ways we in the arts over many years have tried to communicate to academic teachers that we will be glad to coordinate music with something they are teaching if they will let us know enough in advance to plan around music/art units we feel are essential to our program. Very few have ever accepted our offer (the few that have have been a joy to work with). When teachers generally come running to us is when they are in a "time bind" and want us to do--"oh you surely have a few little songs they can sing at assembly next week, don't you?"

Furthermore, time for effective communication is limited by the system where art and music teachers provide conference time for classroom teachers and vice versa.

Conclusion

I have attempted to sketch out the cultural climate for the arts in one elementary school. Although positive in many ways, there are, in my estimation, areas for improvement which I outlined above. It can be seen from the above analysis that how teachers, administrators, parents, and children perceive the arts are vital. The perceptions are transmitted to children. It is only by solid, content-rich, sensitive teaching that we can educate children to possibilities they never before considered in the arts. And publicizing what children do in the arts, as well as the other kinds of learning that takes place in the arts, are vital in our program of educating people who influence the climate for the arts in schools.

FOOTNOTES

1. This paper was written in cooperation with a local school system. I want to thank the four arts teachers for allowing me to observe and participate in their school and for their critique of the first draft of this paper. The content of this draft, however, is my responsibility.

2. This is a composite of 2 classes at two grade levels. The classtime is drawn from a third grade; the cleanup is based on the more competitive experiences in fourth grade classes.

3. These experiences took place on one day and in one class; it is not a composite description as in the art class.

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